

LEAVES

The large, alternate, bipinnate leaves range from 1 - 3 feet in length, 1½ - 2 feet wide. The leaflets, often numbering 40 or more, are ovate with rounded bases, pointed tips, and a smooth margin. They measure 2 - 2½ inches long, and 1 - 1½ inches wide, dark green on the top and pale green on the bottom. The individual leaflets are short stalked.



TWIGS AND BARK

The twigs are very stout, somewhat crooked, smooth or slightly downy, and greenish brown in color. The leaf scars are a large, broad heart-shape with 3 - 5 conspicuous, raised bundle scars. The twigs have a large, salmon pink to brownish pith. The buds are small, downy, and imbedded in the bark. The terminal bud is absent. The bark of the trunk is dark, grayish-brown with low, hard, recurved, scaly ridges.



USES

The wood is soft, heavy, and coarse grained that is rich light-brown, tinged with red. The sapwood is lighter colored and only 5 to 6 annual growth rings thick. It is very durable in contact with the soil and is used for fence posts. The wood is not common enough to be sold as a separate species, but it is occasionally used for cabinetwork.

CULTURE

The Kentucky Coffeetree seed has a hard, impermeable seed coat that prevents or delays germination. One proven method of obtaining good germination is the water soaking method. First, to insure you are planting viable seeds, start by floating the seeds in water. Discard all seeds which float, and retain all seeds which sink. The seed coats must then be broken by filing through the seed coat with a hand file or gently using a nutcracker. The seeds must then be soaked in hot water for 2 to 4 hours or until the seeds have doubled in size.

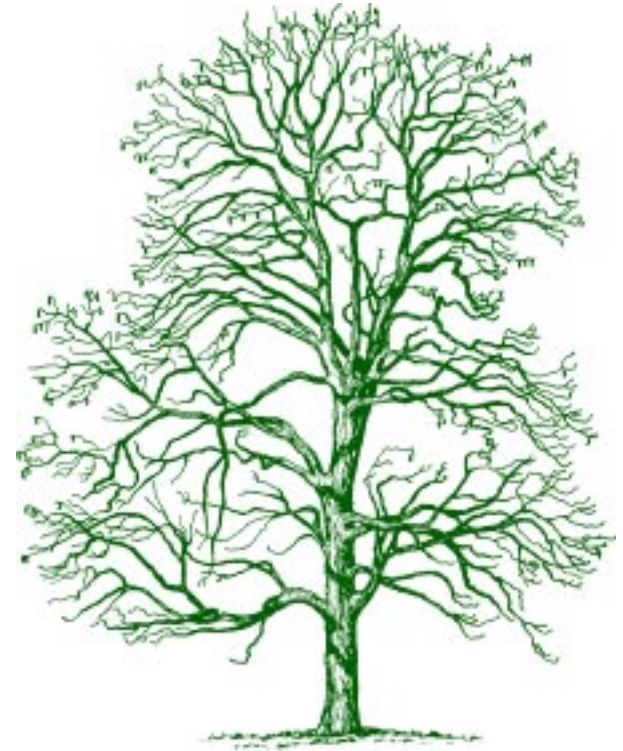
Seed treated by this method can be sown in the spring and covered with 1 - 2 inches of soil. In nursery practice, the sowing rate is 12 - 18 seeds per lineal foot with the rows 6 - 18 inches apart. In general, 60 - 75 percent of the seed sown will produce plantable seedlings. The seedlings may be planted in the field after one year. This can be delayed a year or so if larger trees are desired. Early spring planting before new growth starts is usually best in Kentucky.



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Kentucky Coffeetree



State Heritage Tree

HISTORY

Recognizing its historical significance to the Commonwealth, on Arbor Day 1994, Gov. Brereton C. Jones proclaimed the Kentucky Coffeetree, as Kentucky's State Heritage Tree. The coffeetree had previously held the distinction of state tree from 1976 to 1994.

The tree is also known by several other names. In New York State, it is called mahogany, and in Tennessee, it is known locally as virgilia. Other names are nicker tree, stump tree, coffeenut, and coffeebean.

The name coffeetree refers to the custom of early pioneers who used the seed as a substitute for coffee, at a time when the genuine article wasn't available. The beans were softened by roasting or parching and were then pounded into a meal and boiled for coffee. The beverage was black and bitter, and a little of it would go a long way with the modern coffee drinker. When the early settlers were able to get coffee, they let the wild substitute alone.

The tree's scientific name is *Gymnocladus dioicus*. The first part of the name means "naked branch," and alludes to the stout branches that are devoid of foliage almost half of the year. The second word *dioicus*, means that the male and female flowers are borne on separate trees.

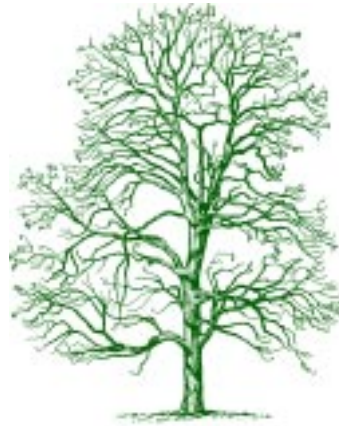
GROWTH CHARACTERISTICS

The Kentucky Coffeetree is usually a medium-size tree attaining a height of 40 - 75 feet and a trunk diameter of 1 - 2 feet. Occasionally, a specimen may reach 100 - 120 feet in height and 4 - 5½ feet in diameter. One of the largest specimens in Kentucky is on the grounds of White Hall State Shrine in Madison County. Just under five feet in diameter, it is 68 feet high.

The coffeetree trunk commonly divides a few feet above the ground into three or four almost vertically ascending limbs, forming a narrow, round topped crown. Under forest conditions, the bole may be straight and clear for 70- 80 feet.

The coffeetree was introduced into cultivation before 1748 and has been widely planted as far north as New England. It was introduced into Europe at an early date.

The short, stubby branches provide an attractive winter silhouette. The large, bipinnate leaves, 1 - 3 feet long, provide an interesting, almost tropical setting. The first autumn frost causes the leaves to fall, and since new leaves appear very late in spring, the tree is bare about six months of the year.



FLOWERS

The greenish-white flowers of the coffeetree appearing in May and June are small. This is in contrast to other trees in the same family, such as the black locust, which has very attractive blooms. Since the male and female flowers are borne on separate trees, the male trees are recommended by some for ornamental plantings since they do not produce seed pods that litter the lawn.

RANGE

The coffeetree grows well from central New York to southern Minnesota and eastern Nebraska and southwest through Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Oklahoma. Although its distribution is wide, this is not a common tree, occurring usually as scattered specimens. It is a typical bottomland species preferring deep, rich, alluvial soils where it grows in association with black ash, cottonwood, and honeylocust. In Kentucky, the coffeetree occurs in open woods and grassy areas in all of the limestone sections. It is most frequent in the inner Bluegrass.

FRUIT

The fruit is a large, heavy pod ranging 6 - 10 inches long and 1 - 12 inches wide. The pods usually contain 4 - 8 dark brown to almost black seeds separated by a mass of brown pulp. The pods can be collected at any time during the late fall, winter, or spring by picking them from the tree or from the ground after they have fallen. Sometimes, the fruit can be dislodged by vigorously shaking or flailing the branches.

Small amounts of seed can be extracted by hand. In nursery operations, a mechanical macerator and thresher is used. The good seed can be separated from the bad by placing them in water and discarding those that float to the top. The number of clean seed per pound varies from a low of 200 to a high of 300 and averages 230. Cold, dry storage is recommended for overwinter storage, and under these conditions, the seed can probably be kept for several years.

